

21 Feb 1973

THIEU VIOLATES

STAT

PRISONER RELEASE AGREEMENT

By Richard E. Ward

The first prisoner-of-war exchange in Vietnam under the provisions of the Paris peace agreement was a lesson in contrasts. It demonstrated the humane treatment accorded POWs by the liberation forces, while underscoring once again the barbaric savagery of the U.S.-Saigon side.

American POWs were returned in dignity directly to American officials and except for the former prisoners still recovering from combat wounds, the returned Americans were all in excellent health. The detainees had all been given advance knowledge of their repatriation and the terms of the Paris agreement on Vietnam.

By contrast, many of the freed liberation soldiers were maimed and suffering from untreated wounds. Until they received assurances from Provisional Revolutionary Government representatives, the liberation forces' detainees did not know whether they were actually being released or being taken away to be assassinated, as had been the fate of most of their comrades.

The condition of the military prisoners held by the U.S.-Saigon side (actually all Vietnamese captured by the U.S. forces who were not executed or tortured to death, as was often the case, were then turned over to Saigon's jurisdiction) raises the question of the fate of the hundreds of thousands of political prisoners still being held in the jails of the Nguyen Van Thieu regime.

There has not yet been any formal release program worked out under the peace agreement for these detainees, most of whom are being held in sub-human conditions, with numerous recent instances of torture and assassination, or slow death from starvation or disease, resulting from inadequate food and sanitary conditions and non-existent medical care.

The 1954 Geneva agreements provided that there would be no reprisals against former supporters of the anti-French resistance struggle, but under the direction of Edward Lansdale and other CIA "advisors," the Ngo Dinh Diem regime tried to jail or liquidate former resisters and those opposing the U.S. puppet administration in a series of combined military and police anti-communist suppression campaigns.

Mass repression

Since that period, the basis of the Saigon regime has been a system of mass repression under the leadership of U.S. aid and generally conceived and directed by the CIA and other U.S. agencies.

Two of the most notorious of these U.S. attempts to suppress the liberation struggle were the "strategic hamlet" program, which sought to place South Vietnam's population in concentration camps, and the Phoenix program, which tried more selectively to "eliminate the enemy structure" by assassination or imprisonment of enemy cadres.

There are, of course, or rather, variants of them, the strategic hamlet has evolved into a camp, with inconceivably inadequate food and shelter. Refugees from U.S. bombs have been held in the peace agreement, the hundreds of thousands in these camps, detainees for all time, are being prevented by the Saigon

authorities from returning to their own villages and towns if these are within the PRG liberated zones.

An unknown number of persons—revolutionary cadres, opponents of the Nguyen Van Thieu regime or simply victims of CIA informers who were paid by the "head"—but at least a minimum of 50,000 persons, have been assassinated under the Phoenix program since 1968. Officially the Phoenix program was turned over to Saigon but clandestine CIA operatives still "advise" it under cover of one or another civilian position in the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

The more "fortunate" victims of the Phoenix program, who were not assassinated or tortured to death before being turned over to the regular police, are among the legions of political prisoners still being detained, assuming they have survived the prison ordeal.

When the Saigon army was on the verge of collapse in 1964-1965, the massive U.S. intervention and bombing of North and South Vietnam began and this was naturally followed by U.S. troops and airmen being taken prisoner. As the number of American POWs increased, the White House and Pentagon waged a carefully orchestrated campaign to convince the American public that U.S. POWs were being brutally treated.

The military prisoners in Saigon's custody are not being released in accordance with the Paris agreement, which provides that they be turned over to the RV.

Prior to the formal release of some prisoners the Saigon authorities claimed to have released as many as 10,000 POWs and a small number of political prisoners, alleged to be "ralliers" to the Saigon regime but whose true fate is still unknown. Presumably the theory behind the program was to prevent able-bodied soldiers from returning to liberated zones, as with the civilians in the "refugee" camps.

Despite this blatant violation of the Paris agreement, Saigon's action has been defended by Washington which claims that the released detainees had been granted their freedom before the signing of the accords. This assertion was refuted by U.S. correspondents who witnessed groups of former detainees waiting for transportation. It may be assumed that those who were released had "rallied" under threats of torture or execution and were unaware of the provisions of the Paris accord which forbids any reprisals. Others who were released were those whose homes were in areas under Saigon administration.

Within a month and half, all POWs on both sides will have to be released, according to the Paris agreement. Although American authorities claim there is no relationship between the question of POWs held by the opposing sides, presumably the U.S. understands that the peace agreement is a single entity, whose components are all related, in the common aim of ending the state of war. And if the U.S. wants to get back all its prisoners, it will have to persuade Saigon to make some semblance of abiding by the agreement. Most of the POWs held by Saigon may then be freed.

Less ground for optimism

There is less ground for optimism for early release of the political prisoners, whose rights were carefully